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The Debate on Overseeing CIA

The so-called debate on the proposal to create a new oversight committee for the Central Intelligence Agency recalls the Duke of Wellington's comment on the Order of the Garter. The Iron Duke said what he liked about this royal favor was that it had "no damned nonsense about merit" attached to it.

Senators understand very well that they are being asked to choose between Senator Russell of Georgia and Senator Fulbright of Arkansas. Russell is chairman of Armed Services and in practice dominates Appropriations. He is close to President Johnson. Fulbright is chairman of Foreign Relations and the leading dissenter to the President's Viet Nam policy.

What senators do not know is which way the cat will jump in Viet Nam as the moment of truth nears for both parties in the mid-term

election this fall. Their preference for the Russell storm cellar on the sensitive question of CIA is inevitable.

Few deny that the Foreign Relations Committee effort to join with subcommittees of Armed Services and Appropriations in overseeing CIA has merit. Larger now than the State Department, the CIA operates in the field where Foreign Relations members are best informed and best qualified to judge the long range issues involved in its work.

Fulbright is especially concerned by the possibility that the CIA is using the Fulbright scholarships, which are worldwide, as cover — as it did various universities. This could mean discrediting not only American scholars but men now in power abroad who are friendly to this country.

At present the CIA director

will "brief" other Senators than the Russell group but not answer their probing questions. The grounds he cites are that CIA was created under the National Security act, not as a foreign policy instrument.

Russell objects to calling the present arrangement "informal" but it is unusual. It consists of five-member subcommittees, from Armed Services and Appropriations, and it is closely held, almost inbred. Each subcommittee includes, in theory, the three most senior members of the majority and the two most senior of the minority of the full committees.

In practice it worked out for years that Senators Bridges and Saltonstall were the minority members for both Armed Services and Appropriations while Russell was in the same case for the Democrats. In December 1961 Bridges died and Senator Margaret Chase Smith was in line for the place from Armed Services with Senator Milton Young the indicated successor from Appropriations.

Russell waxed indignant over a charge that senators were screened for the job to suit CIA and the White House but something happened to the independent Yankee from Maine on her way to its deliberations. Saltonstall had Young named promptly, but Mrs. Smith was not named and her place left vacant.

She was incidentally one of two Republicans who voted against the confirmation of John McCone to be CIA director after he had told the committee he had "no qualifications, background or experience" in such a post. She also is known for insisting on plain answers to plain questions.

Lately, after Saltonstall had decided to retire, it became apparent that the situation would become ridiculous with Senator Smith about to be ranking Republican on Armed Services. She is now a CIA subcommittee member.